



# ANNUAL REPORT 2019 & 2020



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## Letter from the Board Chair

With my return to the position of Chair of the Board of the Westport Museum in 2020 after a hiatus of twenty-five years, I can honestly say that the organization has finally achieved a level of professionalism which has been recognized through the state. This achievement reflects the dedication of our Executive Director, Ramin Ganeshram, and her staff to our museum regarding our collections, archives, exhibits, and programs.

The closure of the museum due to COVID was an opportunity to “get our house in order.” As an archivist, this always has been a goal of mine. I am so proud of what has been accomplished so far with our collections and archives. When the museum opens, the public will have an opportunity to experience this will up close when walking around the galleries.

With the closure of the museum due to COVID, I was concerned that my goal of having a continual presence in the community would fade away. But, through the development of online exhibits, programs, presentations, the museum has ended up stronger than ever.

In closing, the survival of a museum is totally based on donations, sponsorships and grants. Without a generous gift from the Daniel E. Offutt, III Charitable Trust, the Westport Museum would not have survived the pandemic.

We are at an interesting juncture in our history: COVID continues to be a question as we move forward and world events have us constantly reassessing the role of the humanities in public life. But we will positively meet these challenges head on because I have never in my thirty years of being a member of this organization felt so excited about—and confident in—the future of the Westport History Museum.



Cheryl Bliss

Board Chair

## Letter from the Executive Director

Writing this at the end of my third full year as Executive Director of Westport Museum (formerly Westport Historical Society), I am astounded by all we have achieved and all that has happened in the world around us.

In 2019, the organization had truly begun to hit its stride, having achieved much of the goals outlined by the previous Board of Directors in the strategic plan completed in 2018. By 2019, we could focus fully on the mission-based objectives that had been outlined in that plan and that the public demanded.

Most notably this included a commitment to equitable and inclusive presentation of history based in solid scholarship and engagement with experts across the humanities. Toward this end, the Museum revised its mission statement to reflect its new posture:

**The Westport Museum's mission** is to continually engage in scholarly research and examination of Westport's history as part of the larger American story. We encourage interest in recognizing and preserving the records, relics and historic sites of the Town of Westport and vicinity. We encourage a holistic view of local and national history that is inclusive of the histories of all people and groups represented in American heritage.

In 2019, the Museum finally enacted the name change voted upon by the Board of Directors in 2017, moving away from a "Historical Society" which, according to surveys conducted by the organization, meant "closed club" in the public eye to a "museum" which spoke more to an interactive community space for learning and engagement. This approach was affirmed by looking through archival documents from the time when the Museum's headquarters at 25 Avery Place was purchased in the early 1980s—board minutes consistently indicated the desire to create a "museum" at the site and the organization was consistently referred to as the same. With all that we had achieved moving the needle to more professional

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management of this cultural institution, the board deemed it the right time for a formal name change to Westport Museum for History & Culture.

In early 2020, we received a generous gift from the Daniel E. Offutt, III Charitable Trust, to further our goals toward professional museum operations. Little did we know that the gift would sustain us through a pandemic year, allowing us to address much needed collection and archival management projects.

While 2020 has been a difficult year for all, the Museum continues to provide programming to the public on its highly successful virtual platforms—which sees engagement of well over 1,000 people per week—more than in-person visits for an entire pre-pandemic year. Having seen the value of virtual programming, the Museum will continue to provide online exhibits, programs, live talks and more even when we hopefully re-open in 2021.

Re-opening plans are constantly being assessed and updated as needed—based upon virus containment and the much hoped-for approval of a COVID-19 vaccine. It is expected, however, that reopening will be well-orchestrated with mask requirements and occupancy limitations on the number of visitors at any given time. Sanitation protocols, including potential purchase of air purifying equipment will also be in place.

We look forward to continued engagement with the public—either online or, hopefully, in person, in 2021!

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Ramin Ganeshram". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Ramin" being more prominent and the last name "Ganeshram" following in a similar style.

Ramin Ganeshram  
Executive Director

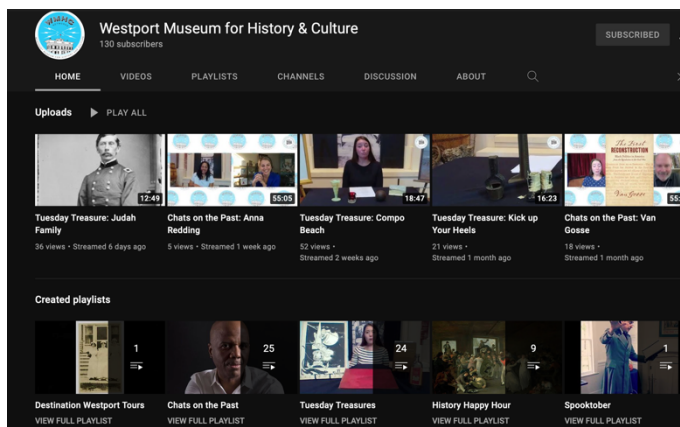
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## Exhibits & Programs

In 2019, Exhibits at Westport Museum continued to be developed in line with the Museum's mission to pursue rigorous humanities goals to use local history as a way to tell national and regional stories that are inclusive of the stories of all people and that impact a larger social realm.

Exhibits for 2019 included *Becoming Westport* which examined the history of the town from the time of native subjugation and European colonization in the 17<sup>th</sup> century; *Taking the Cure* which explored the history of public health and its social dynamics using the two sanitariums local to Westport in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as examples; and *Vision & Dignity* a retrospective on the work of local artist and illustrator George Hand Wright, largely considered one of the founders of the so-called Westport Arts Colony.

During 2020, two major exhibits were planned specifically to honor the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of women's suffrage in the United States. The first *Dragon Lady: The Life of Sigrid Schultz* about the ground-breaking World War 2 correspondent Sigrid Schultz, a Westport resident, opened in February. *Only Beauty Remains* about Nell Dorr, an early female art photographer who also lived in Westport was set to open in late March. However, in early March of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced mass closures and quarantines. *Only Beauty Remains* did not open and *Dragon Lady* was closed with intentions of reopening once the Museum could be physically opened to visitors. In the meantime, an online version of the exhibit was posted. As of this report, *Only Beauty* will be rescheduled for 2021 as well.



Programs in 2019 remained robust, with a focus on imbuing both new and extant programs with scholarship based upon our mission to provide holistic and truthful histories. The beloved annual Lantern Tour at Halloween and Holly Days, during December were expanded to include multicultural celebrations.

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In 2020, programming was greatly hindered due to the COVID-19 pandemic however, the Museum was able to very quickly offer online content through its weekly newsletter and then, within three weeks of closure, through a [purpose-built website](#) for virtual content which included online versions of popular programs like TUESDAY TREASURE, in which items from the museum collection are shown to the public and CHATS ON THE PAST a lecture/discussion series with authors, experts and artisans.

A major programmatic launch was WESTPORT IN FOCUS, an oral history project meant to catalogue local response to the pandemic in real time. Funded, in part, by CT Humanities, WESTPORT IN FOCUS included long lens photos of subjects that accompanied an interview. The long form interview was published on the Museum's [website](#) with teasers on Facebook and Instagram.

Additional new programs included a series produced with local website CT Bites called the HISTORY HAPPY HOUR in which the Museum produced a history segment about a heritage cocktail including a demo from a local bartender. Annual programs that would normally have been held in person were moved online during COVID as well, and these included our Halloween themed Lantern Tour as well as Holiday season programs. While suggested donations were pursued at this time, most of the online programming was free of charge in deference to the financial hardships created for many due to COVID 19.

When it became clear in 2020 that COVID 19 would continue to impact visitation, the Museum quickly expanded outdoor offerings—notably its walking tours—by adding two new tours and more tour dates. The walking tours continue to be popular among visitors of all ages and we continue to expand the information provided within the tours through ongoing scholarship and primary source-based research.



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## Structures

In 2019, the Museum took part in a Conservation Assessment Report (CAP) grant-funded by the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS). As part of that assessment both the Bradley Wheeler House and the Cobblestone Barn were examined for structural issues. A failure was identified in the center of the Bradley Wheeler House because of 1) the removal of bearing columns from the attic at some point prior to 2018 which transferred the entirety of the roof and attic load onto one center column 2) the overloading of a room prior to 2018 with thousands of pounds of textiles above the center column bearing the roof load. During the 1980s, the room had been previously identified as unusable in terms of weight bearing.

During the CAP review a ceiling beam in a room at the center of the house was visibly bowed necessitating emergency removal of the textiles from the room above it, and over the next few weeks, removal of unnecessary items from the attic. These included non-collection items such as decorations, donated glassware, non-collection furniture, old exhibit panels and more. After removal of these items, the load on the beam was visibly relieved.

Grant funded engineering assessments determined the nature of the issue and further grant funding is being sought to undertake comprehensive repairs to ultimately resolve the issue.

The assessment identified other issues with the museum structures: notably the humidity and mold in the Cobblestone barn as well as evidence of rodent activity. Air conditioning units are at the end of their lifespan, necessitating replacement of one unit servicing the archival vault area in 2019 that was partially funded by People's Bank. Leaks in the basement area under the 2002 construction call for reengineering of the structure permanent resolution.

Additional issues that have been addressed over 2019 and 2020 have been upgrading electrical systems, notably to include directional exhibit lighting in gallery spaces as well as leveraging new technologies for climate management. The electrical systems at large throughout the building need upgrade for maximum environmental efficiencies.



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The 2002 addition to the Bradley Wheeler House, including the octagonal gallery has proven ill-suited for installation of exhibits for various reasons 1) the walls are not finished with plywood as called for in a museum setting 2) lighting is not directional or adequate to light collections 3) climate control is not up to museum standards for the protection of collection objects. 4) a kitchen, directly off of the gallery space compromises items within the space in terms of gasses, smells, and heat 5) wall to wall carpeting traps dust debris as well as off-gasses into the space.

Assessments of the structures and property at large has indicated that tree removal will be necessary around the buildings to protect them from wind-related damage. In both 2019 and 2020, falling tree limbs from the property at 190 Main during both summer and winter storms had to be cleared from the roof of the Bradley Wheeler House. Pine trees fronting Myrtle Avenue on the Museum property will also have to be removed at some point in 2021.

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## Collections

In 2019, the Museum took place in a Conservation Assessment Report grant-funded by the Institute for Museum and Library Services. That report indicated that recommendations from a CAP Assessment that took place in 1996 largely remained uncompleted some 23 years later. Among the most pressing issues were the need to fully catalog the items in the archival vault and complete finding aids for each collection as well to determine which items needed conservation.

Issues were also identified with the object and textile collections which did not have consistent paperwork as to provenance. Notably, collections objects were stored all over the antique building including in the unconditioned attic which can reach upwards of 110 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer and below freezing in the winter.

The textile collection had been stored poorly in archival boxes, many of which were overstuffed with items. Additionally, the textile collection, which includes quilts, accessories, clothing and other materials weighing thousands of pounds had been stored in a room above a compromised weight bearing column. The collection has been moved off-site to a climate-controlled off-site storage unit while the Museum board and administration determines how to reorganize and upgrade spaces to bring materials on site.

Over the course of the pandemic closure in 2020 the Museum undertook archival and collections management that had been left largely undone over the last forty years. This included creating a climate controlled, organized storage space from a little-used conference



room and organizing all objects within this space on movable shelving lined with acid free foam. Each unit and shelf is now labeled and all objects from around the building are stored here. Additionally, the newly appointed collections manager has directed a team of volunteers to track down paperwork for all objects, if extant, and determine

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if they are donations or purchases. During the period between 1980 and 2006 objects were purchased at the Museum's expense from antique dealers. A high percentage of these items were duplicate purchases for the purpose of outfitting "period" rooms in the Museum's previous iteration.

Subsequent research as to the purpose of the Bradley-Wheeler House, its location in the town and larger regional history determined that this previous interpretation was incorrect and, per the board's strategic planning process, the rooms were decommissioned. The purchased objects have been segregated from legitimate donations and will be assessed on an ongoing basis as to their appropriateness relating to the museum's mission and humanities goals. Object deaccessioning, if recommended, will be followed pursuant to state regulations and guidelines outlined by the American Alliance of Museums.

Climate control is key to collections storage and preservation. The Museum's location in an antique house is not ideal for these endeavors. To address these issues with the limits of our space, in 2020 the Museum implemented wireless tiles to measure temperature and humidity in collections areas for the preservation of paper archives, textiles and objects as recommended by the Smithsonian Institution.

Collections objects are now being entered into a statewide database with any available information. Items that had been poorly stored and therefore damaged—such as outdoors in the cobblestone barn or in the unconditioned attic—are subject to more extensive conditions reports and possible de-accessioning.

Pursuant to object acceptance and accessioning guidelines, a processing area has been set up in which donations can be examined, conditions reports filed, and quarantined, as needed, from the larger collection for such period of time as may be necessary.

The archival vault was left in total disarray without a cataloging system and with items in piles on the floors and the shelves. As with the objects collection accessioning of papers accepted as donations had not taken place for some years. There was no way to know what was in the collection—except via the knowledge of one or two volunteers. The result was that researchers were unable to access the wealth of information contained in the Museum's holdings.

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Over the course of 2020, and through partial grant funding, the Museum hired an archivist to work with volunteer archivists and lay volunteers to catalog the archives according to research library standards and to write finding aids, starting with the most important and extensive family collection—the Adams Papers. Finding aids from this effort are now available on Connecticut Digital Archives for public use.

The extensive management work within the collections and archives has been funded by grants from the Daniel E. Offutt III Charitable Trust, Historic New England and the CT State Library.

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## Marketing & Outreach

Over the course of 2019 and 2020 the Museum has steadily increased marketing efforts through digital platforms. Over the course of the pandemic the Museum has tripled its Instagram engagement.

Building banners announcing seasonal events and, during 2020, our online offerings continue to be a key outreach area. Seasonal paper program booklets that provide an at-a-glance look at the events happening at the institution. Ads within the program booklets provide local merchants a low-cost manner to promote their businesses while providing revenue for the museum.

Outreach in the form of volunteer acquisition has been strong in 2019 and 2020 with a steady interest in volunteer opportunities among teenagers. The Museum's volunteer base spans from age 13 to 93 and the word of mouth these volunteers provide about the Museum's programs continue to be invaluable.

The Museum's programs are regularly featured on Drive Time, a program on WPKN hosted by the Fairfield County Cultural Alliance however the lack of local news media, following the closure of *WestportNow* a local news site, has somewhat impacted short-term marketing efforts, particularly around programs. Calendar postings through state-wide outlets have been helpful in closing this gap as has increased event coverage by News12 CT a 24 hour cable TV news station.

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## Financials

WHS' fiscal year is concurrent with the calendar year. As is consistent with WHS' operations year over year, operating expenses including salaries, represented the lion's share of the organizations expenditures.

In 2019 and previously, grant funding came from a variety of sources including new organizations. The lion's share of major grants came from outside of the town including state sources such as Connecticut Humanities and federal sources such as the Institute for Museum & Library Services.

Unexpected expenses relating to repairs to Wheeler House which is an antique structure as well as flaccid fundraising caused expenses to outweigh earnings. Investment income continued to be robust, following market trends and careful allocation of funds. At the end of 2019, the Museum was advised of gift of excess of \$550,000 from the Daniel E. Offutt III Charitable Trust with a formal award date anticipated in January of 2020. Assets including Wheeler House and the value of cash holdings and investments at the end of 2019 totaled \$1,538,171. Full details may be found in the Museum's 2019 990 financial filing with the State of Connecticut's Department of Revenue Services as Westport Historical Society, Inc.

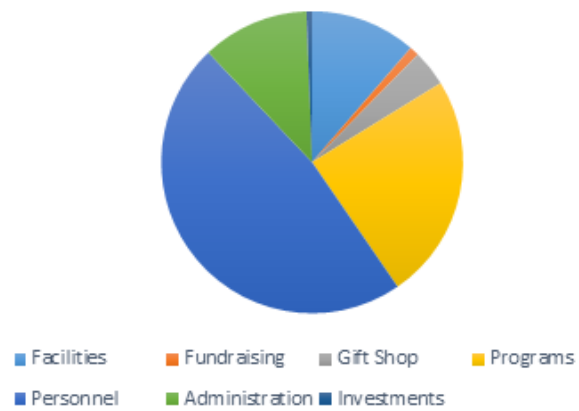
In 2020 COVID-19 dramatically impacted fundraising and programmatic revenue for the museum as it did for nonprofits nationwide. The Museum did receive payroll assistance as part of the Paycheck Protection Program as well as additional assistance funds from Connecticut Humanities. An annual appeal successfully raised close to \$10,000. Smaller events like a semi-virtual version of the popular Westport Is Your Oyster raised approximately the same amount as the live event in previous years—roughly \$2,000 after expenses. In 2020 an outdoor Winter Market, also successfully raised money in the form of gift shop sales and vendor booth rentals while maintaining outdoor protocols for COVID safety. There are plans to repeat the success of this event with a Spring 2021 market and, potentially, an additional Fall market in 2021.

## 2019 Revenues & Expenses

## Revenue by Category - 2019 Actual



## Expenses By Category - 2019 Actual



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## 2020 Revenues & Expense

**Revenues by Category - 2020 Actual**



**Expenses By Category - 2020 Actual**







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